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SUBJECT: BINGU DUMPS TWO TOP MINISTERS

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11. (SBU) Summary: President Mutharika fired the Ministers of Agriculture and Economic Planning and Development on October 26, primarily for political reasons. Mutharika has taken over as minister of both portfolios for the time being. The dismissals come as Malawi's political class begins to look forward to the 2009 general election, and serve as a warning shot to those considering challenging the president inside or outside his party. The firings have also created leadership vacancies in two more key public offices, further increasing the number of top-level posts that remain unfilled. End Summary.

The End of the Road

12. (SBU) Malawi's national radio announced the dismissal of Minister of Agriculture Uladi Mussa and Minister of Economic Planning and Development David Faiti on the evening of October 26. Though the president gave no official reason for the move, according to Embassy sources Mussa was fired both for his political machinations and professional incompetence. Mussa had quietly begun campaigning to be the party nominee for president in 2009 (a position Mutharika had already announced he seeks to fill), and had bungled the importation of this year's fertilizer subsidy. While the second mistake might have been a pardonable offence, challenging the sitting President was certainly not, and Mussa was removed from office. For his part, Faiti's dismissal appears to have been purely political, as he was punished for working with a former Mutharika ally who is now an opposition leader.

A Political Loss

13. (SBU) The firing of Mussa, who also is Vice-President of Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and had been a leading advisor to the president, came as a surprise. A Muslim from the Central region, Mussa had been considered a possible running mate for Mutharika in 2009 due to his religion and regional ties (Mutharika is a Christian from Southern Malawi). Mussa is one of the country's top Chichewa orators, and had been considered an excellent political asset for the party. While Lilongwe is rife with rumors over the reasons for Mussa's demise, it seems clear that his political ambitions outstripped his usefulness to the administration.

14. (SBU) Faiti's dismissal was less surprising, as he was one

of the few cabinet members never to join Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), having become an independent after the party that sponsored him into office, the Republican Party (RP), dissolved last year. Faiti was rumored to have recently been in contact with RP founder Gwanda Chakuamba, a former Mutharika ally and cabinet minister who fell out with the president last year and became a fierce critic. Chakuamba had been the main power behind Faiti's election as an MP, campaigning heavily for him in 2004. With an eye towards 2009, Faiti now seems sure to join Chakuamba's New Republican Party with the hope of retaining his seat in parliament.

Comment

15. (SBU) Mussa's dismissal could turn out to be a significant blow to the party, as he had been heavily involved in building the DPP itself. Mussa had been the key organizer of a by-election campaign, and had put the DPP in a good position to win its first election in the central region. However, if he goes on to leave the party (he is still officially the DPP Vice-President), the opposition Malawi Congress Party should easily retain the seat. This would be a significant psychological blow to the DPP, which is trying to establish itself as a national (not just regional) party.

16. (SBU) However, Faiti's dismissal could prove to be more important to the running of the government. Mussa had been largely a figure head for the Ministry of Agriculture, and has a fairly competent Deputy Minister and Principal Secretary who will continue to run the everyday operations of

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the Ministry. Faiti, however, was a major player in the GOM's Millennium Challenge Account Threshold Program, and had been involved with the crafting of the program from the beginning. While the Minister of Finance has also been involved with the MCA program, the GOM will need to quickly

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fill Faiti's position in order to maintain the momentum it has built up thus far.

17. (SBU) The firings are the latest example of Mutharika's tendency to dismiss ministers and senior officials almost on a whim, without much apparent concern for who might replace them or the potential impact on programs. In July the president hastily fired the GOM's two top prosecutors, effectively hamstringing Malawi's anti-corruption enforcement efforts, and has not replaced them. He has repeatedly transferred experienced senior civil servants without regard for the disruption to programs they administer. He has dismissed the governing boards of several parastatals and constitutional bodies, and has left the positions unfilled for lengthy periods. Perhaps most troubling for Malawi's democracy, Mutharika dissolved local assemblies in 2005 ahead of scheduled local government elections, but then postponed the poll due to a food crisis and has since dragged his feet in organizing the elections.

18. (SBU) This pattern of decision making is based on short-sighted political advice from self-interested advisors close to the president, as well as his own distrust of his subordinates. It is further evidence of an autocratic streak which renders decisions that reduce the effectiveness of government and, ironically, slow the positive and worthwhile reforms that Mutharika is trying to achieve.

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